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## Playing dumb at the CIA

Robert Gates, nominated by President Reagan to be director of central intelligence, assured Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) during his confirmation that he is a quick study. The Tower Commission may have been quicker.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) pointed out in the confirmation hearings that Gates had helped the former director, William Casey, prepare testimony on the Iran-Nicaragua arms scandal that was "skimpy, scanty, uninformative and really misleading." As Bradley and Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine) made clear through probing questions, Gates was a yeoman practitioner of the agency policy of dodging artfully and playing dumb.

The recurrent tendency of the CIA to degenerate into a cross between the Cosa Nostra and a secret Pentagon is a sign that something about the Washington view of "intelligence" is seriously wrong.

It might be cured if Congress focused on the difference between intelligence - providing accurate information to the government about a complex and sometimes dangerous world -

and the CIA's other side, called "operations."

The problems have arisen almost entirely on the operations side, which can range from interfering with the sovereignty of other countries - by buying influence or tilting elections - all the way to targeted assassinations and broad-brush terror (both of which, under Casey, the CIA cheerfully endorsed). These methods, by definition, break laws, which is why they have to be clandestine and antidemocratic; they cannot be publicly understood, debated and approved.

Because many of the administration's foreign policies have been unjustifiable and unintelligent, it fears the intelligence committees enough to have backed itself into Contragate. The administration understood that the policies would not fly. Its mistake was to try to muck on anyway by dealing Congress out.

Robert Gates seems to have tried this and gotten caught. The Senate Intelligence Committee wishes to question him. It might be better, as Senator Specter suggests, for the administration to withdraw his name.